

CHANDRATAL- BARALACHA LA TREK

INTERESTING FACTS/INFORMATION ABOUT THE PLACE

Chandigarh

Widely regarded as one of the most livable cities in India, Chandigarh is a planned city designed by the great French architect Le Corbusier. If possible, recommended detours are a quick drive around the landmarks of the city that showcase the amazing brutalist symbolic architecture, such as the Capitol Complex, Secretariat, Open Hand Monument and the High Court.

Another amazing location worth visiting is the incredibly surreal Rock Garden Complex by Nek Chand. (and the very famous Sukhna lake situated in the heart of the city.)

Spiti Valley

The name Spiti can be translated as “The Middle Land” for it is the region that lied in between India and Tibet. Its ancient monasteries are a treasure trove of old Buddhist research and culture and has millennia old books that have been very well preserved, thanks to its extremely dry and cold climate. Among the many monasteries, the most famed are the Kyi (or Kii) monastery, which with its amazing cliff hugging design, is one of the most photographed; and the Tabo monastery, that is regarded as the Dalai Lama’s favorite. Among its sub-divisions, is the Pin Valley that due to its remoteness is the last sanctuary of the Buchen lamas of the Nyingmapa sect. The highest motorable pass is the Kunzum-La which, at 14,931 feet is the only access to the valley in winter, but can also get closed down for short periods of time due to snowfall. The valley is quite barren and tough to negotiate with an average height of 12,000 – 14,000 feet for most of its settlements.

Culture and Lifestyle

The people of Spiti are Buddhist and their language belongs to the Tibetan language family. They used to practice polyandry but of late this is becoming rare with the advent of tourism and outside influences. The biggest festival is Losar (Tibetan new Year) and is celebrated with great joy during the months of either January or February, based on the “kaalachakra”, the Tibetan calendar.

The villages are sparsely populated and the people here are hard working and practice potato farming or weaving. Owing to the harsh winters, the people still favour the nutritious salty butter tea and store dried meat for the long months with little or no access to greens. The houses are flat topped and built with a short squat profile, well spread out, since the region is prone to earthquakes. The design style is reminiscent of the Tibetan style and in places; you would be forgiven for thinking that post the Chinese invasion of Tibet, the true culture and Architecture of Tibet probably thrives here more as compared to Lhasa.

Geography

There is some amazing natural topography in this seemingly barren land. While going further north of Kaza (the district headquarters) you will see fantastic mesas and fluted rock canyons that are an adventurer's delight. If you take the trouble to go on down to the Spiti river bank, you will see some fantastic multi-coloured, perfectly round shaped pebbles on the river bed and by its sides. They are green, blue, pink, maroon, purple... all kinds of fantastic hues, indicating the rich mineral wealth of the region.

There are also a couple of truly breath-taking lakes in the region – the Chandra-Tal (Moon Lake) that actually falls in Lahaul district but is approachable from Kunzum Pass. It is a divine looking crescent shaped lake with emerald blue waters that change colour throughout the day. The other less-visited lake nestled away in the mountains, is the Dhankar lake. This is approached via a day trek from the town of Dhankar, home to the famous Dhankar monastery.

Adding adventure are the stark peaks that surround the valley, some of which are also trekking peaks and are a rewarding excursion on their own. The best example is Mt. Kanamo (19,500 feet) which is accessible from Kibber, where you can do a multi-stage trek upwards to the summit. Another exciting expedition is the Bara Shigri glacier that is the largest glacier in Himachal Pradesh, and also the second longest in India (after Gangotri)

The Pin valley National Park that lies within Spiti is also the home of the elusive Snow leopard and the ibex and you can undertake expeditions set out to try and get a glimpse of the majestic creature.

Batal

Batal lies at the banks of the Chandra River that gushes like an unstoppable beast and has probably the most dangerous rapids of the region. We will camp at the camping meadows close to the famous "Chandra Dhaba" that is run by the genial braveheart couple simply known as Chacha and Chachi (uncle / aunt) .They have been instrumental in saving numerous lives during whiteouts and landslides that occur so frequently in the region and have received national and state commendations for their deeds of bravery.

Batal is famous for its wild, blustery high altitude winds as it lies in a channel between the mountain ranges cut by the flow of the river, creating a barren valley with rounded multi coloured boulders and pebbles of all sizes. You can get some stunning views of the mountain ranges lying in the Kullu region as well as the Lahaul region from here. Some of the most prominent peaks visible from here are the Papsura (White Sail) and Dharamsura. Completing the ring are the CB (Chandra Bhaga peaks) that tower over the camp. The camp site is also famous for spectacular star gazing since there is very little pollution here, being far away from civilization!

Lahaul Valley

The Lahaul valley is the sister valley of Spiti and is very similar to it in many aspects with the same barren terrain and stark snow peaks only allowing hardy trees and bushes. The capital of Lahaul is Keylong which is an important town enroute to Ladakh. From Rohtang Pass, the road bifurcates with one form leading toward Spiti and the other leading towards Lahaul and then onto Ladakh. Lahaul has

a number of virgin peaks and its peaks rise like silver steeples above the black, brown flanks of the mountains. The most prominent lakes in the valley are the Chandratol, the Suraj Tal (just below Baralacha Pass) and the Deepak Tal. These high altitude lakes are the most beautiful in India and are famed for their beauty and their ever changing blue colour that changes from turquoise to sapphire to aquamarine and all the shades in between as the sun moves across the sky.

The valley is bounded by 2 high altitude passes, the Kunzum La that separates it from Spiti and the Baralacha La (the highest pass in the district) at an elevation of 16,040 feet. The Pass connects the Ladakh region with Lahaul and is covered by snow through most of the months of the year, surrounded by numerous mountain peaks and affording one of the most amazing panoramas of the region.

Kullu district

Kullu is the prime administrative district in Himachal Pradesh and is also the most populous. The largest valley in the district is the Kullu valley (also known as the Valley of the Gods) where we have the famous hot springs of Bashisht and the popular tourist town of Manali. The northern border of the Kullu district is bounded by the Rohtang pass that is one of the most visited tourist destinations in the state. The river Beas is the primary river that flows through the district and most of the big towns such as Manali and Mandi lie along its banks.

Kullu valley/Manali

It is a broad open valley famous for its sprawling apple orchards and the equally famous pashmina and angora shawls. The airport to access Manali town is located at Bhuntar near Kullu town, about an hour away (by car). The primary religion of people in the valley is Hinduism and there are many famous temples in the valley where people come from far and wide as pilgrimage.

A Brief History

Kullu has been a prosperous and fertile valley since recorded history and has found mention in all the epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata) and the Puranas. In the later eras, a number of dynasties laid claim to the land, from the Nandas, to the Mauryas, to the Guptas, Palas and Karkotas. The region was later united by King Harshavardhana, but after his death, it again broke apart into small principalities, which were conquered by the Marathas and the Sikhs, before finally being annexed by the British. However, it remained fairly secluded until the construction of a motorable road only after Indian Independence, which meant that the people have retained their age-old customs and traditions, without being influenced or assimilated.

Mythology

According to Hindu mythology, Kullu valley is regarded as the cradle of all mankind after the great deluge. The name "Manali" is derived from "Manu-alaya" that means the home of Manu, who is said to be the Hindu version of Noah, the progenitor of humanity. You will find the delightfully wood carved Manu temple a couple of kms above old Manali.

Another story from the Mahabharata tells of Bheem, the strongest of the Pandavas, killing a demon terrorizing the area, "Hadimb" and then marrying his sister "Hadimba". Their son, "Ghatotkacha" was one of the pivotal characters in the Great War against the Kauravas, sacrificing his life to make sure Arjuna would be invincible. The Hadimba temple, shrouded in dense pines on a hill above Old Manali is a beautiful multi-tiered wooden, pyramidal temple that was built to honour Hadimba devi.

Legend also talks about "Arjuna Gupha", a cave on the flanks of Mt. Deo Tibba, where Arjuna is said to have meditated in order to acquire the most destructive weapon, the Pashupati Astra from lord Indra.

Naggar palace

Naggar was the capital of Kullu for 1400 years and its 16th century wood and stone castle is exquisite and a must visit while in the area. There is a beautiful weeping willow in its central courtyard with lovely views of the snow capped mountains in the distance. Paintings by the German artist Nicholas Roerich, adorn the walls of the art gallery in the castle. There are also interesting ghost stories that are quite entertaining and worth listening to, especially on chill, winter nights. Most of the castle is now an exclusive heritage hotel.